

Objectivity and Moral Expertise*

By: [Terrance C. McConnell](#)

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Article:

Recently a well-known magazine published an article entitled 'Moral Specialist.'¹ This article recounts the activities of Russell McIntyre, described by the authors as a theologian and philosopher who specializes in bioethics. McIntyre is routinely consulted by physicians for help in solving ethical problems. He is asked for moral advice on such matters as abortion, euthanasia, and sterilization for teenagers. McIntyre even wears an electronic 'beeper' so that when untimely moral quandaries arise he can easily be reached. McIntyre says that ultimately such moral decisions should be made by the people involved — the physician, the patient, and the family. However, he claims that there are still many gray areas in bioethics 'where it is best to call in an expert for consultation.'

Though the situation just described is not commonplace, neither is it unique. It is not at all unusual for medical schools to employ philosophers to teach courses in medical ethics. And now hospitals have begun to utilize persons trained in moral philosophy. These ethicists make rounds with physicians, discuss the moral implications of cases, and provide moral advice.²

Judging by people's reactions, many seem to think that there is something untoward about employing Russell McIntyre or someone like him to provide moral advice. A natural explanation of this unfavorable reaction is that people are suspicious of anyone who is called or professes to be a moral expert. In short, people are skeptical about the very notion of moral expertise. In this essay the possibility of moral expertise will be explored. Several questions will be raised and answered. First, if we assume that morality is an objective matter, must we say that there are moral experts? Second, why are there such serious doubts about the possibility of moral experts? And are these doubts well founded? Finally, if there are moral experts, should we rely on them to solve moral problems?

Part I

There is disagreement among philosophers about the concept of moral expertise. Some say that a person is not a moral expert unless he is an expert at living a morally good life.³ On this account a moral expert is, among other things, a model of virtue. This is not the way the term 'moral expertise' will be used here. Instead I shall say that a moral expert is someone who knows what people ought to do or is at least capable of helping people see more clearly (perhaps through questioning) what they have good moral reasons for doing. Such persons, if there are any, need not be infallible; that is not an essential feature of an expert in any discipline. These persons will, however, have either greater knowledge than most others of the general principles which agents should follow, or a greater ability than most others to help agents formulate and understand plausible beliefs about how they ought to act. Now these people will behave, though, is another matter. There need be no necessary connection between knowing what is right and doing what is right.⁴ This conception of expertise is not atypical; it has parallels in other areas. Topnotch political scientists are not always adept politicians. Similarly, some of the best

coaches and analysts in the various sports were mediocre as performers. And there is no doubt that there are some who have expert legal knowledge but do not always obey the law faithfully.⁵

Our initial interest here is in the connection between objectivity and moral expertise. Intuitively, we may say that a matter is objective if there are correct and incorrect answers to questions arising about it. To put it more precisely and with regard to a specific matter, we may say that questions in ethics are objective if and only if those questions are such that whenever two people disagree about a moral judgment, at least one is mistaken. A matter is subjective if questions concerning it do not admit of correct and incorrect answers. Ethics is a subjective matter if and only if it is possible for two people to disagree about a moral judgment and neither is mistaken. It is often said that if a matter is objective, then answers to questions about it are independent of what those investigating the matter believe. By contrast, if an area is subjective, issues in that field are just matters of opinion; there is no independent check on a person's views.

It seems plausible to maintain that there cannot be experts concerning a matter unless it is objective. Objectivity, it seems, is a necessary condition for the possibility of experts. Peter Singer *seems* to endorse this claim for ethics. As he puts it, 'Obviously, if anyone's moral views are as good as anyone else's, there can be no moral experts.'⁶ But is ethical objectivity a sufficient condition for the presence of moral experts? If ethics is objective, must there be moral experts? We can imagine someone who is inclined to answer these questions affirmatively presenting the following argument for ethical subjectivism.

- (1) If a matter is objective, there must be experts to deal with issues concerning that topic.
- (2) But there are no moral experts.
- (3) Therefore, morality is not an objective matter.

Let us call this the 'no moral experts' argument. Whether premise (2) of this argument is plausible is an issue to which I shall return. For now, let us examine premise (1). One who advocates premise (1) seems to be guilty of an elementary confusion. To put it roughly, this person confuses ontological and epistemological matters. Just because the world is a certain way, it does not follow that anyone *knows* that it is. A person who claims that moral judgments are objective need not say that he or anyone else *knows* what one ought to do in a given situation. The objectivist is committed only to saying that there is a right answer. It seems, then, that premise (1) is false and that the 'no moral experts' argument can be rejected quickly.

A slightly modified version of the 'no moral experts' argument can correct this defect, however. To avoid confusing ontological and epistemological matters, premise (1) can be altered to read

- (1a) If a matter is objective, it must be possible for there to be experts to deal with issues concerning that topic.

This is not the only change that must be made, though. The conclusion, (3), does not follow from (1a) and (2). Premise (2) must be strengthened to read

- (2a) But there *can* be no moral experts.

But what justification is there for this strong claim? One cannot appeal to the subjectivity of moral judgments to support (2a), for that would be a blatant case of question-begging. It is hard to see how anything short of an independent argument for subjectivism in ethics can support (2a); and if there is such an independent argument, the 'no moral experts' argument is superfluous.

In spite of these criticisms, however, one has the feeling that there is something underlying the 'no moral experts' argument which has been missed. This rejection seems all too quick. Some content can be given to this feeling of uneasiness; a revised version of the 'no moral experts' argument can be presented.

(1b) In matters that most people believe are objective, there are experts.

(2b) But there are no moral experts.

(3b) So one has reason to believe that morality is not objective.

Unlike the original argument and its modification, this revised version does not pretend to be deductively valid. It is rather an argument from analogy. Presumably a defender of this argument reasons as follows. There are many matters that most people believe are objective — the physical sciences, mathematics, and perhaps some of the social sciences.

With respect to each of these disciplines, there are recognized experts. So we have good reason to believe that if any matter is objective, there will be experts concerning questions that arise about it. If there is an area of inquiry in which there are no experts, one who wishes to maintain that this area is objective owes us an explanation. Why is this matter different from others that are objective?

Stated this way, the 'no moral experts' argument presents the ethical objectivist with a challenge: either he must explain why ethics differs from other areas that are thought to be objective or he must argue that there are moral experts. Let us see, then, how the objectivist might respond to the revised version of the 'no moral experts' argument.

Part II

The first question that we wanted to answer was whether the objectivist must say that there are moral experts. In examining the responses that the objectivist might make to the revised version of the 'no moral experts' argument, then, let us begin with those that do not assert that there are moral experts. If the objectivist agrees that there are no moral experts, how will he explain the difference between ethics and most fields that are thought to be objective?

One response that the objectivist might make is that ethics is simply a very difficult field, more difficult than those other areas in which there are experts. There are no moral experts, he might say, because there is still no established body of knowledge in the area of ethics. There are answers to moral questions, but because of the inherent difficulty of the field they are not easy to ascertain. As I shall suggest later, there is a grain of truth in this response. On the whole, however, it seems unsatisfactory; I suspect that very few will be satisfied with this explanation. People have been grappling with moral questions at least since the days of Socrates. If there are correct answers to ethical issues, it is reasonable to expect that some progress would have been made in determining those answers in more than 2000 years of work. And if some progress had been made there would be an established body of knowledge, and it is reasonable to believe that some would have mastered it better than others. It will not be plausible, then, for the objectivist to explain why there are no moral experts by appealing to the intrinsic difficulty of ethics. Unless ethics is so difficult that it takes thousands of years to make even minimal progress, this explanation will not be adequate.

There is a second response that the objectivist might make, a response which purports to explain why ethics, unlike other objective areas of inquiry, has no experts. The objectivist can begin by pointing out that among the disputants, there are no authorities for settling disagreements in most other areas either. When two chemists argue about a matter, they do not typically appeal to an expert to settle the dispute; they are the experts. The same is true of other areas believed to be objective. But how does this help one who claims that moral judgments are objective? He can point out that the chemist plays the role of an expert vis-a-vis the layman. There is a distinction between professionals and laymen in such areas as chemistry, physics, and mathematics because people can and do avoid making judgments about these matters; indeed, one need not have any interest at all concerning these areas. In ethics, however, no one can be a layman. Since each person is a moral agent, no one can avoid making ethical judgments. This explanation suggests that there are no moral experts, not because there is no ethical knowledge, but rather because each of us is more or less equal with respect to that knowledge.⁷ In all other objective areas of inquiry there are experts because there are laymen; in morality there are no laymen.

As a response to the 'no moral experts' argument, this is weak. It is true that each person is a moral agent; none of us can avoid making moral decisions. But it does not follow from this that each person will be roughly equal with respect to ethical knowledge. Experience in other areas would suggest that just the opposite is likely to be the case. All students in elementary schools must study mathematics. But they are certainly not even roughly equal in their knowledge of that subject. So even though all people must make moral decisions, it is reasonable to suppose that if there are correct answers to moral questions, some will be better than most others in determining those answers.

The efforts to explain how ethics differs from other matters believed to be objective have failed. This suggests that the objectivist's most plausible response to the 'no moral experts' argument is the obvious one: he can claim that there are moral experts. If he can support this claim, he will have shown that his opponent's argument is unsound because it has a false premise. But to respond in this way presents the objectivist with another set of challenges. He must be able to identify a group of people as moral experts and to convince us that they are indeed plausible candidates.

Part III

If there are moral experts, who are they? A response that is neither uncommon nor unreasonable is that moral philosophers are such experts. It is plausible to say that moral philosophers possess expert ethical knowledge and/or the ability to enable others to understand what they have good moral reasons to do; this is so because some of the skills they possess, qua moral philosophers, are ones that one would expect would produce such knowledge or ability. Having the ability to distinguish good arguments and bad arguments is a characteristic which will help one in arriving at moral knowledge, and this is a characteristic that philosophers should possess. One who is able to recognize fallacious reasoning is less apt to be led astray by emotional appeals and other irrelevant considerations. Moral philosophers presumably have a better understanding of moral concepts than most people, and having such an understanding is surely necessary for achieving ethical knowledge. One who has a clear understanding of moral concepts is less likely to become confused in discussing complex moral problems than others. When particular moral issues are discussed, it is common for the interlocutors to appeal to analogies and to make comparisons with other cases. When such methods are employed, moral philosophers should be particularly adept in ascertaining the relevant similarities and relevant differences, and thus in making the appropriate inferences. It is also reasonable to expect that moral philosophers will be better able to identify novel alternatives for dealing with complex problems, and this is a skill that will be helpful in attaining moral knowledge. Finally, and not insignificantly, some moral philosophers spend much of their time discussing, studying, and writing about moral issues. People in other professions do not enjoy such a luxury. It is not implausible to maintain that if a reasonably intelligent person has more time than others to reflect on a particular set of problems, that person is likely to have more knowledge about solutions to those problems. These considerations, then, suggest that if there are moral experts, moral philosophers are reasonable candidates to fill that role.⁸

What has just been argued, however, should not be taken to suggest that all or only moral philosophers are moral experts. It is reasonable to claim that philosophers who specialize in normative ethics will be in the best position to claim the title of moral expert; for those who concentrate on metaethics or the history of ethics, the claim will be less plausible. Among those who have specialized in dealing with normative issues, not all will be competent. For every field, there are representatives who are an embarrassment to practitioners of that discipline; normative ethics is no exception. And, of course, it is at least possible that some persons have cultivated the relevant skills even though they are not trained or employed as philosophers.

The first question has now been answered. An objectivist in ethics is *not logically* compelled to say that there are moral experts. However, the revised version of the 'no moral experts' argument suggests that unless there is some explanation which shows how ethics differs from other areas believed to be objective, the absence of moral experts will give one a prima facie reason for claiming that ethics is not objective. Because the most

obvious reasons to show why ethics can be objective even though there are no moral experts fail, the objectivist has some reason to support the claim that there are moral experts.

Part IV

A subjectivist who supports the 'no moral experts' argument will not be impressed with the objectivist's response. Undoubtedly he will continue to deny that there are moral experts. This leads us to consider the second question. Why do many believe that there are no moral experts? Why is the very notion of moral expertise regarded with suspicion? Several reasons for doubting that there are moral experts will be examined here.

If we are told that someone is an expert in a given field, that creates certain expectations. In particular, we believe that if we have a problem in that field, the expert should be able to provide us with useful advice. One reason for doubting that there are moral experts is that no one seems to be available to provide useful advice concerning ethical matters. Moral philosophers are particularly notorious in this regard. As most people know, those who go to moral philosophers with difficult ethical problems rarely receive straightforward, unequivocal pieces of advice. But, it is argued, if a person has a problem in one of the sciences, he is likely to receive a satisfactory answer if that problem is taken to an expert.

Though this is an important objection, one who claims that there are moral experts has a plausible response to it. He can point out that knowledge of what one ought to do in a particular situation depends on both knowledge of general moral principles and knowledge about the facts of the particular situation. If there are moral experts, the knowledge which makes them experts will be of general moral principles. But moral experts, qua moral experts, will not be more knowledgeable than others regarding particular factual matters. To illustrate this point, consider a simple example. A moral expert may advise a couple that they should not have a child if the risks that the child will be severely deformed are great. In so counseling the couple, the expert is appealing to a moral rule (which, for the sake of the argument, we shall suppose is plausible). Unless the moral expert also happens to be an authority in genetics, however, he cannot advise this particular couple whether in fact it is likely that any child they have will be severely deformed. To know this, he needs the expertise of a geneticist. This explains, then, why moral experts cannot give the sort of straightforward, unequivocal advice that one is accustomed to receiving from experts in other fields. Knowledge of what one ought to do consists of two components, only one of which is within the ethicist's realm of expertise.⁹

There is a second way to deal with this objection. The critic's claim that moral philosophers never provide unequivocal advice to those encountering specific problems might be denied. Russell McIntyre, apparently, is someone who does offer straightforward answers to particular moral questions. There is no reason that others could not do the same. However, since providing answers of this sort requires the application of general moral principles to particular situations, the persons giving such advice must have more knowledge about the facts than most laymen. This does suggest a natural extension of the notion of a moral expert. If someone wishes to claim the title of an expert in medical ethics, for example, that person must be knowledgeable about both moral and medical matters. Similarly, assertions of expertise in business ethics, environmental ethics, or legal ethics can be made credible only if the claimant has considerable factual knowledge concerning the area in question. This view has an important implication. Having a moral expert available may not be enough for one who is grappling with an ethical problem. Someone with a narrower (or different) speciality may be needed. Of course, a moral expert who does not specialize in the field in question should be able to refer the person to someone who can provide the needed advice. In this respect, ethics is like such diverse fields as medicine, law, physics, and economics, to mention but a few. Narrow specialities develop within these fields. The role of a person with general knowledge of one of these areas is not to solve highly specific problems.

A third response can be made to the objection that moral philosophers do not provide unequivocal advice for those facing ethical problems. It is not true that experts in other fields always have quick and simple answers to problems in their areas, as the proponent of this objection assumes. Consider the field of medicine. Sometimes

physicians have no idea what the nature of a patient's medical problem is. Few infer from this, however, that physicians lack expertise or that medicine is a subjective field.

To develop this third response further, note that even in the physical sciences experts do not always have answers to specific problems. However, most people pay little attention to matters in the physical sciences that puzzle even the experts. By contrast, it is those apparently irresolvable moral problems to which people pay the most attention. The reason for this is that ethics is what Aristotle called a practical discipline; ethical knowledge is pursued for the sake of action. To put the point another way, it is rare when a problem in the physical sciences must be resolved immediately. Scientists enjoy the luxury of being able to withhold judgment. This is not usually the case with moral problems, though, Moral agents must act (or refrain from acting) at the time they face their problems. Reputed moral experts do not enjoy the luxury of being able to withhold judgment.¹⁰ It is a mistake, then, to deny that moral philosophers are ethical experts because they do not provide useful advice for those facing moral problems: in some cases they are able to give such counsel; but to claim that this is a necessary condition for being a moral expert is false in any case.

It has been suggested here that moral philosophers can claim to have expert knowledge of general ethical principles. It is just this claim, however, that gives rise to another reason for doubting that there are any moral experts at all. Undoubtedly most moral philosophers would defend rules prohibiting lying, stealing, killing, and torturing; and most would probably recommend that we keep our promises, honor contracts, and perhaps aid others in distress. But can moral philosophers claim to have *expert* knowledge of these rules? Are these rules known exclusively by moral philosophers? It seems that they are not. Most ordinary men and women act on and, upon questioning, will defend these same moral rules. In fact, as evidence in defense of their more general principles, philosophers often claim that these principles yield judgments that are in accord with those of most people. Thus, for the most part, philosophers do not want to advocate rules and principles that deviate sharply from the views of ordinary people. It is clear that moral philosophers, qua moral philosophers, are not experts concerning factual knowledge, knowledge which is necessary in order for one to act on one's principles and rules. It now seems, though, that they are not experts regarding moral rules and principles either. And if they do not have expertise regarding these, it is implausible to say that they are moral experts.

To respond to this objection adequately, it must be shown that, in spite of appearances, moral philosophers have a knowledge of moral rules and principles that most people lack. Since the *content* of the rules defended by philosophers does not seem to differ significantly from the content of rules held by most other people, the expertise of philosophers must lie elsewhere. A plausible suggestion is that moral philosophers *hold* their views in a *different way* than most people. It might be said that moral philosophers have knowledge of the rules and principles they hold, while most people have merely (presumably correct) beliefs concerning these precepts. What does this suggestion amount to? It means that philosophers can justify their beliefs in ways that ordinary men and women cannot. If pressed, they can provide a rationale to support the rules and principles they hold. When encountering novel situations to which these rules and principles must be applied, they will be able to handle the cases with greater ease. When dealing with sophists and skeptics, moral philosophers are less likely to become confused or to abandon their rules and principles.¹¹ The idea here is a simple one. Being able to defend or justify ones belief is usually said to be a necessary condition for having knowledge. Ordinary people can say something in defense of their moral beliefs; they cannot do as well as moral philosophers, however. And philosophers are sometimes able, through questioning, to get others to see what general moral principles underlie their particular beliefs.

Two important objections to the claim that moral philosophers are ethical experts have been answered, then. It is true that moral philosophers are not always able to provide straightforward, unequivocal advice concerning certain moral problems. However, an explanation of that fact was given which is consistent with the claim that those philosophers are moral experts. And though it is true that moral philosophers do not often hold moral rules and principles that differ radically from those held by most people, nonetheless philosophers are able to defend and argue for those rules in ways that most people are not. It is plausible, then, to assign to some moral philosophers the title 'moral experts.'

Part V

There is another objection to the claim that ethicists are moral experts which must be discussed. My earlier remarks might seem to suggest that all moral problems have the same general form: ascertaining how a single, well established rule or principle applies to a particular situation. Not all moral problems are like that, however. In many cases moral problems arise because two or more rules apply to the same situation and yield conflicting prescriptions.¹² When a moral problem arises because one does not know how a rule applies to a particular situation, the source of this problem is doubt about the facts of the case. Thus this is moral doubt only in an extended sense. But when a moral problem arises because of a conflict between two or more rules, this is an unequivocal case of *moral doubt*.

Moral problems of the second sort — the kind that generate pure moral doubt — are the most common and the ones agents find the most troublesome. It is appropriate, then, to expect that moral experts would be most useful in helping us find solutions to these common moral problems. Yet this is precisely where moral philosophers seem to fail. There is radical disagreement among these so-called moral experts about how to resolve conflicts between rules. The advice an agent will receive for resolving moral conflicts will depend on the favorite theory of the 'expert' whose advice he seeks. It is the presence of this widespread disagreement which gives rise to the most serious objection to the claim that moral philosophers are moral experts. If the most plausible candidates for the title 'moral expert' disagree among themselves, how can we decide who the genuine experts are? Renford Bambrough expresses this point as follows:

There are not even any adequate neutral criteria for determining who are the experts, so that an attempt to appeal to experts simply transforms an ethical or political dispute into an equally unresolvable dispute about who are the ethical or political experts. In such a case as this it has become misleading to speak of experts at all, since it is an important part of the meaning of the word 'expert,' in its standard uses, that an expert is a man who can be appealed to by the ignorant or puzzled layman.¹³

Several things can be said in response to this objection. First, it is easy to exaggerate the degree to which reputed moral experts disagree. Act utilitarians, rule utilitarians, and deontologists of various persuasions often support the same moral rules. And not infrequently they agree about which rules should take precedence in cases of conflict. They disagree, of course, about *why* the rules in question are the appropriate ones. And they disagree about specific cases, ones which highlight their differences. But the area of agreement among them is wider than is often supposed.

Second, proponents of this objection suggest that if several people disagree among themselves regarding a particular matter, then they cannot all be experts in the discipline in question. Such a claim is implausible, however. Uncontroversial cases of experts in other disciplines show this. Physicians sometimes disagree among themselves regarding diagnostic judgments; legal scholars frequently disagree about what the correct legal decision is in a complicated case; and physicists take radically different positions on fundamental issues in their discipline. Yet this does not lead us to doubt that physicians are medical experts, that legal scholars are experts in the law, or that physicists are experts in physics. So too, then, the fact that moral philosophers disagree about fundamental questions need not lead us to doubt that they are experts in ethics.

Third, and most importantly, this objection is based on a conception of expertise that is too narrow. It seems to presuppose that one who is an expert in a discipline must have plausible answers to *all* of the problems that arise in that discipline. But surely that is mistaken. Those persons whom we quite reasonably call experts in medicine, the law, and the physical sciences often encounter problems in their respective disciplines that they are unable to answer. So too ethicists need not be omniscient or infallible to qualify as moral experts.

There is an additional point, closely related to the third response, which shows why this objection fails. A prospective agent can receive insights from several moral experts even if they recommend conflicting courses of action. Suppose each of two purported experts advises an agent concerning a moral problem and the advice

they give conflicts. If each provides reasons to support his recommendation, an agent may be enlightened by each. He may see the problem in a new light and appreciate aspects of it that he did not previously. Clearly, he cannot *act* on the advice of each of the experts. But in this regard ethics is not different from medicine or the law. A patient cannot follow the advice of two different physicians when their recommendations conflict. And a client cannot follow the counsel of two attorneys when the legal advice they offer conflicts. In neither the moral, the medical, nor the legal case, however, does it follow that the advisee was not edified by each expert.

When difficult cases arise in medicine or the law, a person is thought to be prudent if he solicits the advice of several experts, even when it is known that they will probably disagree. There is no reason to think that moral decisions are different. Of course, if two moral experts disagree about an issue (and ethics is objective), both cannot be right. And since having true belief is a necessary condition for having knowledge, concerning this *particular* issue both cannot have knowledge. But each may have played an important role in helping the agent arrive at a decision; each may have called to the attention of the agent features of the situation that he would have otherwise neglected. As a result of having consulted with both, the agent will be better able to decide what he has good moral reasons to do. This suggests that when difficult questions arise, moral expertise is more likely to be found in moral philosophers collectively than in them singly.¹⁴ Looking at it this way enables us to explain conflicting feelings that moral philosophers sometimes have. On the one hand, they are sometimes reluctant to give persons advice about specific moral problems. On the other hand, these same philosophers resent the fact that lawmakers and other public officials do not take into account what they have to say about difficult moral issues when public policy is made.

It can be acknowledged, then, that moral philosophers often disagree about how to resolve conflicts. It does not follow from this admission, however, that all of these philosophers cannot be moral experts. Experts in other fields disagree about fundamental questions and there is no reason to think that morality should be any different.

Part VI

We turn now to the third question. If there are moral experts, should we rely on them to solve our moral problems? To answer this question, two different levels at which moral decisions are made must be distinguished. *Individual moral decisions* must be made by each of us daily; *social policies* must be adopted by society (or a legislative body acting on society's behalf) to handle moral problems that must be addressed by the community collectively.

When social policies are being considered to deal with moral issues, it seems plausible to maintain that moral experts should be consulted. When laws are being proposed that deal with medicine, the automobile industry, the environment, the deregulation of oil prices, and the like, experts in those respective fields are sought for help. Usually they are asked to provide relevant factual information or to predict the effects the proposed legislation might have. It is quite reasonable that these experts are called upon since decisions regarding policies that govern these matters should be fully informed ones. Of course, this same consideration shows that society should consult moral experts when legislation dealing with ethical matters is being entertained.¹⁵ To fail to do so is to risk ignoring relevant factors that ought to be considered when such decisions are made. In fact, however, moral experts are rarely consulted by legislators. Only recently (April, 1981) a subcommittee of the United States Senate held hearings on the abortion issue. The witnesses paraded before this committee were all physicians and scientists. The persons who arranged that only those witnesses be called apparently believe that the abortion issue raises only one important question and that that question is a scientific one: When does human life begin? These people are confused.¹⁶ The issues involved are moral ones, and if the experts are needed they should be *moral* experts (though medical experts may be needed too.) Here again, though, moral expertise is more likely to be found in philosophers collectively.

This does not mean that in adopting social policies the advice of moral experts should be followed blindly. The recommendations of medical, economic, and environmental experts are not always acted on. A society *cannot* follow the advice of all experts in these areas because they often disagree among themselves; and moral experts

also disagree with each other, as we have seen. But if the views of experts in any given area, including ethics, are solicited, the chances are better that any ensuing decision will be an informed and rational one.

But should an *individual* seek the advice of moral experts when faced with difficult moral decisions? The physicians who routinely turn to Russell McIntyre for help evidently answer this question affirmatively.

Initially, it would seem that the considerations that support appealing to moral experts for help when formulating social policies would also show that an individual would be well advised to do the same. When a person has a medical or legal problem, he or she invariably confers with an expert. The reason, of course, is that this person wants to make a decision based on the best available information. Since moral decisions are as important as any that one must make, an agent will want those to be rational and well informed too. Thus, appealing to an expert for advice would seem to be quite appropriate.

Before accepting this conclusion, however, two objections must be considered. The first objection claims that relying on experts to make one's ethical decisions conflicts with moral autonomy. It is sometimes said that 'no one can make another man's moral decisions for him.'¹⁷ The notion of moral autonomy underlying this objection is not always clear. What proponents of this criticism seem to have in mind, though, is that responsible persons determine for themselves what ought to be done. Responsible moral agents are not subject to the will of another; they make their own decisions about what they should do. Autonomous people may do what others recommend, but not simply *because* it has been recommended.¹⁸ The effect of this is that moral agents are required to be autonomous and so they may not rely on experts to solve their moral problems.

To respond to this objection, it is not necessary to deny the importance of moral autonomy. Indeed, it is a truism to say that people must make their own final decisions about what they ought to do. The emphasis that the critic puts on moral autonomy, however, seems to commit him to a false dichotomy. The critic assumes, it seems, that either a person acts in accord with his moral principles or against those principles. It is possible, however, that a person subscribes to no moral principles that are applicable to his situation. If an agent encounters a difficult moral problem to which he has given no thought, he may hold no moral principles with which he can comply or act against. Given the critic's account of moral autonomy, it would seem that the agent is not capable of acting autonomously in these situations.

There is another problem with this objection. To assume, as the critic does, that relying on the advice of an expert is incompatible with moral autonomy is a mistake. If an agent chooses to appeal to an expert for moral advice, that decision itself is an autonomous one for which the person is responsible. Presidents, corporate executives, and other authorities often delegate power to subordinates and accept responsibility for the actions of those subordinates. One is not tempted to say that these authorities have surrendered their autonomy. They have simply chosen to exercise it in a different way. The same is true of moral agents who rely on the advice of experts. Deciding from whom to solicit advice is itself a decision with considerable moral import; and deciding whether to act on that advice is even more important and something for which the agent himself is directly responsible.

One can go even further in responding to this first objection. Autonomous moral agents may be *required* to seek the advice of experts in certain situations. If a person knows that someone else is more adept at making difficult moral decisions than he himself is, it seems that there is a duty to seek the help of that other person (assuming, of course, that the person is willing to help and will give sincere advice). If a person cannot discharge his obligation to perform a certain act unless he does some other act first, it is plausible to say that he has a derived obligation to perform this other act. In complex situations one may not even be able to *know* what one ought to do unless one seeks the advice of a moral expert. So if one knows who the moral experts are, one may have an obligation to seek their advice when a complex moral decision must be made.¹⁹ One hopes that situations this difficult are few and far between, but how widespread they are is another matter.

There is a second objection to individual agents relying on moral experts for advice that must be considered. This objection points to the bad consequences that will allegedly ensue if this practice is followed. If agents rely too heavily on experts for advice they will become moral cripples, as it were. If they do not hold their moral principles rationally and autonomously, they will be unable to apply these principles to new situations (or even to ordinary ones) when moral experts are not available to be consulted. Clearly agents often face situations where moral decisions must be made quickly; there is little time to deliberate, let alone to consult an expert for advice. Agents must be prepared to deal with these situations. But if they become dependent on experts to make

all their moral decisions, they will not be able to deal adequately with moral situations when no such help is available.²⁰ It would be too strong to suggest that each agent must become a moral expert;²¹ after all, that would require that each person expend so much time and energy dealing with moral matters that little else would be accomplished. According to this objection, however, each person is required to become reasonably knowledgeable about moral matters. This cannot be done if others make one's decisions. And, the critic might point out, this is how morality differs from other areas (for example, medicine). The ordinary person is not required to know how to cure illnesses. When he himself encounters a medical problem, he may rely totally on experts to deal with it. Of course, he may someday find himself in a situation where physicians are unavailable and he *wishes* that he possessed medical knowledge; but possessing such knowledge is not required. By contrast, the ordinary person is required to possess moral knowledge. So relying totally on moral experts is inappropriate.

In responding to this objection, it would not be wise to deny the importance of moral knowledge. Agents do encounter situations in which they must make moral decisions quickly, and to deal with these adequately they must have moral knowledge. But the critic's claim that appealing to moral experts for advice will bring about a kind of moral ignorance seems dubious. Two reasons can be cited to demonstrate this. First, it is plausible to say that the bad consequences to which the critic calls attention will follow only if agents rely almost totally on moral experts. For any area of inquiry, a person will probably lack knowledge of that area if he never handles problems on his own. What seems inappropriate about the story of Russell McIntyre and the physicians who seek his advice, I think, is that one gets the (perhaps erroneous) impression that they consult him every time a moral decision must be made. If agents were to rely on moral experts in this way, the bad consequences mentioned above probably would ensue. Moral experts need not be utilized in this way, however. It seems appropriate to consult them only when one is facing a particularly difficult moral problem. Many moral decisions that agents must make are relatively simple ones, situations in which any reasonable person will know what he ought to do. It is worth noting as an aside that medical decisions parallel moral ones in this respect. Most people do not seek the advice of physicians for every medical judgment that must be made. When a person has a headache, a common cold, or a minor burn, he usually handles such a problem himself. Only when a more difficult problem arises does one need to seek the advice of a physician. If agents utilize moral experts in a similar way, the worry that they will become morally handicapped can be dismissed.

The second reason that this objection misses the mark is that one can actually *gain* knowledge by appealing to experts. If a moral expert recommends to a person not only what he should do but *why* he should do it, that person will be better equipped to deal with similar situations in the future. This does, however, point to a way in which moral expertise differs from expertise in other areas. Consider again the field of medicine. Many who go to physicians for medical advice are interested only in results. They do not care why a given treatment works, only that it works. In some instances it might even be the case that the patient would be unable to understand how and why the treatment worked. Unless a patient requests it, it does not seem that a physician has an obligation to explain why a particular form of treatment was prescribed. But where moral experts are concerned, matters seem to be different. A moral expert who failed to explain why he recommended a certain course of action would not be doing his job. If a moral expert does explain why an action is the right one, agents can gain moral knowledge; thus the consequentialist objection loses its force.

If what has been argued here is correct, then it is not wrong for individuals to appeal to experts for advice when they encounter difficult moral problems. My last remarks, however, do give rise to an interesting question. Suppose an agent who seeks the advice of a moral expert is unable to understand why the recommended course of action is the right one. The agent is unable to follow the reasoning of the expert. Yet the agent knows, let us suppose, that the person is a moral expert. From past experience the agent knows that this person has been reliable in his moral recommendations. Because of this knowledge, the agent is in a peculiar situation. He cannot understand why the action prescribed by the expert is right, but he believes (correctly) that the expert's judgment is more reliable than his own. Normally a person who knows his own weaknesses and orders his life to minimize the effects of those shortcomings is behaving rationally. When it comes to responding to a moral problem, however, for some reason people think that a person should understand why what he proposes to do is

right.²² Not to allow an agent to follow the advice of an expert when he does not understand why he ought to do what the expert says may be too restrictive, though. An agent may be in a situation where he does not know what he ought to do, he knows that his own judgment about such matters is unreliable, and he knows some moral expert whose judgments about such cases are astute. It seems absurd to deny to the agent the one source of guidance available to him when he encounters such situations. Moreover, if it is suggested that agents *always* ought to act autonomously, additional problems are created. Agents who do not know what they ought to do will be required to refrain from performing any act, and this may be much worse than acting on the advice of a moral expert. It seems appropriate, then, for agents to rely on moral experts even when they do not understand why the action recommended is right. One can only hope that these cases are rare.

Part VII

Earlier in this essay (in section I) I quoted a passage from Peter Singer which seemed to suggest that if subjectivism is true, there can be no moral experts. This is equivalent to saying that objectivity is a necessary condition for the presence of moral experts. If this claim were correct and if my arguments for the existence of moral experts were acceptable, one would have an argument for objectivism in ethics. Yet it does not seem that I have said anything to show that moral judgments are objective. What has gone wrong?

The claim that objectivity is a necessary condition for the possibility of experts in any area is false. To illustrate this, let us consider an example. Among those who like the taste of wine (and who take such things seriously), there are well-established criteria employed to distinguish good and bad wines. In evaluating any given wine, careful attention is paid to such characteristics as body, bouquet, and dryness. And there are some who can make the appropriate discriminations far better than most of us. They are appropriately called wine-tasting experts. It does not follow, however, that it is an objective matter that some wine tastes good. (Whether such a claim even makes sense is another matter.) Whether wine tastes good may ultimately be a subjective matter. But among those who *agree* that it tastes good, there are established standards for making comparative judgments. For all that I have said here, morality may be like wine-tasting in this regard. Moral experts may be those who have mastered agreed upon social rules. But those rules may not be objectively grounded; they may be merely conventional. The objectivity of an area, then, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the presence of experts in that area.

To conclude this paper, let us consider the responsibilities moral philosophers have if they are moral experts. If E.J. Lemmon is correct, they must take their role very seriously.

Perhaps no one is properly equipped to give moral advice to anyone else, but if anyone is it is the philosopher, who at least may be supposed to be able to detect bad reasoning from good. It is a corollary of this view that a philosopher is not entitled to a private life — by which I mean that it is his duty to hold political and religious convictions in such a form as to be philosophically defensible or not to hold them at all. He is not entitled to hold such beliefs in the way in which many nonphilosophers hold them, as mere articles of faith.²³

The basis for Lemmon's claim, I take it, is that moral philosophers have incurred this additional obligation in virtue of the role that they play. It would certainly be wrong for a physician to make a claim about how to treat an illness that was neither well thought out nor medically defensible. Because of the respect physicians are accorded and the seriousness with which their medical opinions are taken, they must be very careful in making statements about medical matters. Attorneys have similar obligations with regard to statements about the law. And it seems plausible to say that moral philosophers will have similar obligations concerning statements they make about ethical matters, but *only if* they are *regarded* by others as moral experts. It would seem that Russell McIntyre and other philosophers employed by hospitals do have this additional obligation. It seems doubtful, however, that moral philosophers in general have this obligation.

Notes

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1. *Newsweek*, January 8, 1979, 67.
2. For a recent discussion of this practice, see Anne C. Bauer, 'Philosophers in Hospitals: Are They Welcome on the Wards?', *The New Physician*, March 1982, 20-4. See also, the *New York Times*, March 19, 1982.
3. See, for example, Bela Szabados, 'On "Moral Expertise"', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 8 (1978) 119-20, and Robert W. Burch, 'Are There Moral Experts?', *The Monist*, 58 (1974) 646-58.
4. In saying this I do not beg any questions about the connection between obligation and motivation. I allude here to the dispute between internalists and externalists described by William K. Frankena, 'Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy,' in A.I. Melden, ed., *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle; University of Washington Press 1958), 40-81. Internalists hold that there is a necessary connection between obligation and motivation; if a person believes that he ought to do an act, he will be motivated to some degree to do it. Externalists deny that there is such a connection between obligation and motivation; a person may believe that he has an obligation and have no motivation to perform the required act. Even the internalist, though, need not say that one who knows what is right will always do what is right. Having *some* motivation to do what is right is consistent with failing to do it.
5. Contrary to what I have maintained, there is one reason for thinking that having a good moral character is a necessary condition for being a moral expert. In order to know that one ought not do a certain act in a particular situation, one may have to possess a degree of moral sensitivity that only a good person has. It might be claimed, for example, that only a good person would be sensitive enough to know that a certain remark would be taken by others as insulting or offensive. Even if there is such a connection between moral character and knowledge, however, this does not show that knowledge of general moral principles requires a morally good character. And it is knowledge of general moral principles, I shall suggest later, that is necessary in order for one to be a moral expert.
6. Peter Singer, 'Moral Experts,' *Analysis*, 32 (1972) 115. Note that I say Singer *seems* to endorse the claim that objectivity is a necessary condition for the possibility of experts. Professor Singer has indicated to me in correspondence that he does not accept such a strong claim, and in fact he tends to agree with what I say about this issue in section VII.
7. The point that in moral matters no one is a layman is made, in a different context, in Plato's *Protagoras* 326e-327e.
8. The considerations that I cite here to show that moral philosophers might reasonably be regarded as moral experts have been mentioned by others. See Peter Singer, 117 and Richard W. Eggerman, 'Moral Philosophers and Moral Advisers,' *Metaphilosophy*, 10 (1979) 161. Eggerman, however, unlike Singer, denies that there is such a thing as expert moral knowledge (164).
9. I suggested earlier that there is a grain of truth in the claim that ethics is more difficult than other areas believed to be objective. Since in order to know what one ought to do in a particular situation one must have knowledge both of general moral principles and of the facts to which those principles are to be applied, ethical knowledge is often difficult to attain.
10. A similar disanalogy between the positions of scientists and judges is pointed out by Rolf E. Sartorius, *Individual Conduct and Social Norms* (Encino, CA: Dickenson Publishing Company 1975), 185.
11. Some of the things that I say here are similar to what Kant says in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. L.W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1959), 20-2; Prussian Academy Edition, 403-5. Kant claims that the ordinary man does not need abstract philosophy in order to know the difference between right and wrong. However, since the inclinations tempt people to act contrary to their moral principles, philosophy is needed 'to secure admission and permanence' to these precepts.
12. This point is made by many authors. See, for example, W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1930), 30.2, and W.D. Falk, 'Moral Perplexity,' *Ethics*, 66 (1956) 124-5.
13. Renford Bambrough, 'Plato's Political Analogies,' in Peter Laslett, ed., *Philosophy, Politics, and Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1956), Vol. 1, 110. Others have echoed this same objection. See, for example,

R.W. Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning* (New York: Schocken Books 1969), 88-9, and D.Z. Phillips and HO. Mounce, *Moral Practices* (London: Routledge and Keagen Paul 1969) 108. Bela Szabados, 122-4, deals with this objection. My response to this objection differs from that of Szabados, however, I should also point out that Bambrough's views on this topic have changed. See, for example, his *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press 1979).

14. This point was suggested to me by Norman Dahl.
15. In many cases, of course, it will be appropriate and desirable to enlist the help of moral experts *and* experts from other fields. In formulating legislation dealing with euthanasia, for example, moral and medical experts might be needed.
16. I am assuming that these people were being sincere. If they were being sophistical and manipulating the subcommittee for political purposes, then their defect is moral rather than intellectual.
17. Kai Nielsen, 'On Being Morally Authoritative,' *Mind*, 89 (1980) 425. This same objection is discussed by Szabados, 124-6.
18. This familiar account of moral autonomy is sketched by Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row 1970), 12-18.
19. Some of the points made in this and the previous paragraph are elaborations of some remarks of Szabados, 125-6. My assertion that there is a requirement to solicit the advice of a moral expert, however, is much stronger than the claim endorsed by Szabados.
20. In the context of Socratic ethics, a point similar to this is discussed by Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977), 90-1 and 97.
21. However, Szabados, 127, claims that each person is required to try to become a moral expert.
22. Henry D. Aiken, *Reason and Conduct* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1962), 143, expresses the point this way: 'But in morals such situations can hardly arise. For just as no one can live by another's principles, so no one can be expected to conform his judgment and his will to certain allegedly objective principles which he has not in conscience made absolutely his own.'
23. E.J. Lemmon, 'Moral Dilemmas,' *The Philosophical Review*, 71 (1962) 156.